

Appropriations Committee

Testimony on Governors House Bill No. 5037 Submitted by Nathan Frohling, Director of External Affairs The Nature Conservancy February 16, 2022

Thank you Chairwomen Walker and Osten, Ranking Members France and Minor and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee for the opportunity to testify in support of H.B. No. 5037, An Act Adjusting the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June Thirtieth 2023, (referred to herein as Governor's 2023 Budget Adjustments).

The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) mission is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. We are non-partisan, science-based and often serve as a facilitator, bringing multiple interests together to solve complex problems. In Connecticut we have over 43,000 members, protected over 50,000 acres, opened 85 river miles and manage over 60 preserves. We greatly value working in partnership with the State of Connecticut in support of conservation, environmental protection, climate mitigation and adaptation goals. State appropriations are critical to these goals.

Meeting the Federal Funding Opportunity:

The federal bi-partisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) offers the opportunity of a generation to support conservation and climate mitigation and adaptation goals. To realize this potential for Connecticut the State must play a key role in both facilitating the distribution of these funds and in their direct use by the State. We are very pleased to see that 26 positions have been identified at DEEP to support DOT's efforts to fully utilize Connecticut's share of IIJA transportation related funding. We would emphasize that these staff should be dedicated to advancing state-of-the-art environmentally focused and friendly projects including green infrastructure along with traditional infrastructure. Additionally we are particularly pleased to see 27 additional positions to assist DEEP in supporting multiple IIJA-related environmental, clean energy and climate programs. We know there have been difficulties in the past with DEEP not being able to fully utilize funding opportunities because of staff limitations in administering such funding. It is critical that this does not happen with the IIJA.

The other key factor is the State's ability to provide needed match for the federal funds. We were pleased to see \$75 million as a Governor Recommended Adjustment to the OPM appropriation as State matching funds for projects and programs allowed under IIJA.

Finally we would note the importance of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the potential for these funds to be used to support the State's land conservation programs, particularly DEEP's Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program (OSWA). It is understood that there are other important uses of the ARPA funds such as to support outdoor

recreation and visitor experiences that have become increasingly vital to so many people seeking access and use of natural outdoor spaces associated with the Covid pandemic. Indeed, there is a great need to address park and recreational facility maintenance and repair needs. We are pleased to see a \$15 million Budget Adjustment for alterations, renovations and new construction at state parks and other recreation facilities, including Americans with Disabilities Act improvements. Having said this we also need to connect the increasing need for open space protection with the funds needed to accomplish it. Land conservation is now critical for climate mitigation (e.g. carbon sequestration) and climate adaptation (e.g. flood protection) in addition to ecological and cultural values.

Passport to the Parks:

Simple stated, The Nature Conservancy is a strong supporter of the Passport to the Parks Program including the need to protect this dedicated funding source from being raided for other purposes. That is particularly important now given the increased use and pressure on the State's parks alongside of decreasing and insufficient State staff to support use of the parks. We appreciate that the Governor's Budget Adjustments maintain revenues of the Passport to the Parks Program. We remain concerned along with our colleagues that park staffing is inadequate and suggest measures be taken to sustain and expand park staffing including consideration of wages so adequate hiring, particularly of seasonal employees, can be realized.

Community Investment Act (CIA):

The Community Investment Act (CIA) has become an essential funding source for DEEP's Open Space Matching Grants program, as well as affordable housing, historic preservation, and farmland protection programs. It is a fantastic program and we appreciate the Governor's protection and continuing full funding for it.

Thank you again for this opportunity to comment.